

Constructed Portraiture

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Filipino artist Wawi Navarroza creates highly stylised, vibrantly coloured photographs that bring together disparate objects and aesthetics in a layered exploration of self and place. *Aesthetica* speaks to the artist about portraiture, visual anomalies and hybrid images in the context of a group exhibition at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London.



A: In *Tonight the Air is Warm*, your work is being shown alongside eight Southeast Asian artists. How do you see your practice fitting into the region's wider contemporary art scene?

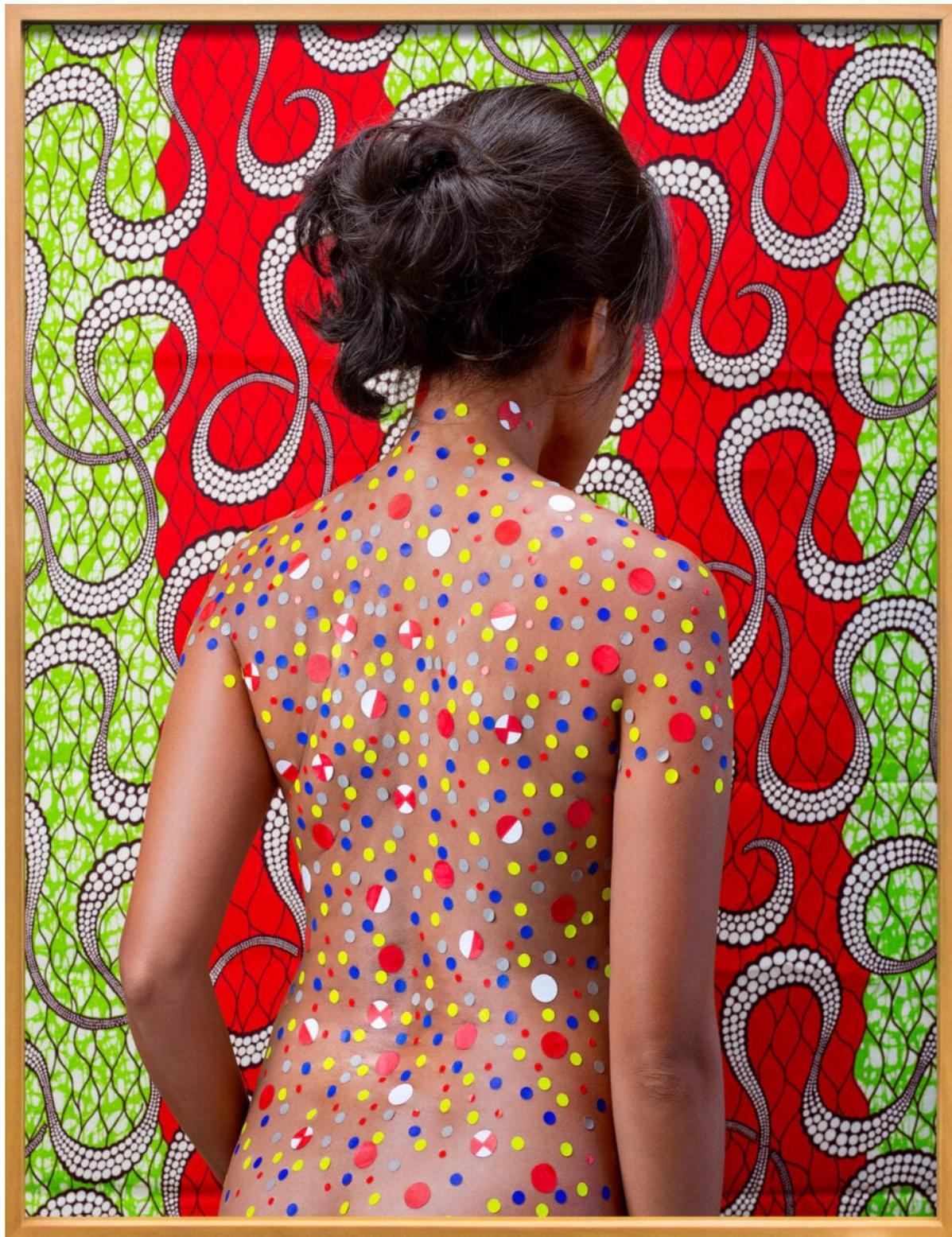
WN: I'm really happy about the show because a lot of my friends are participating in the exhibition; we first became friends through region-focused shows like this. People who come from Southeast Asia, however, tend to say that it's not really a place, but more of a political construct. To me, what's more interesting is how we address our "tropicality" – and that's not just about specific countries, but also climate. From that perspective, we can draw lines to Latin America, Mexico, the Caribbean and even the African latitude. In terms of the exhibition, I think my work is closest to that of Balinese artist Budi Agung Kuswara. We both talk about a certain magical realism, or a mythic undertone that exists in the region.

A: How do you define the "Tropical Gothic"? Is it a term that's useful to you as an artist?

WN: I like the combination of two concepts which are almost at odds with each other. I think of it as a place where the absurd can ferment and grow. The Gothic in this context is not the same as the European definition of the genre; it's more of a casual term for something that is extra, possibly mysterious, dark and full of drama. The Tropical, however, is lush and sweaty. The Tropical Gothic offers a stage where this contrast can exist. For me, it's also a kind of container for everything that I can't exactly define – all of the things that I've been observing, living, breathing from childhood until now. What I'm

currently exploring as the Tropical Gothic might change in a few years, but for now, it is a very good position from which to view myself as Filipino, as an artist and as a woman. It is an anchor for my practice.

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A: The images, which come from your series *Self-Portraits & The Tropical Gothic*, adopt an almost graphical style that has the effect of flattening the different visual layers. What appealed to you about this approach?



WN: I wanted the audience to really think about the pictures as constructed. We have a connotation of photography as documenting something that is right in front of the lens, which is true of any lens-based medium, but a constructed image tells us that there was a hand orchestrating the scene. In some of the images, I've included certain visual anomalies such as cuttings or repetition to underline the fact that an image can be easily manipulated (particularly in a digital world), but also point at the physical presence of the author.

I also wanted to deliberately break away from the idea of perfection or seamlessness in relation to an idealised concept such as “the exotic”. Exotic doesn’t just mean paradise, there’s a side of it that is plastic, artificial, humid and damp. I gathered objects as raw materials from markets and neighbourhoods in the Philippines, and later, I arranged them intuitively in the studio as a *mise-en-scène*. They’re familiar objects, but because I was processing them through my own experience, it becomes a kind of tapestry of what I know. References to European art history are filtered into the image *vis a vis* the experience of being born and raised in the Philippines. For example, the work entitled *La Bruja*, is reminiscent of a very popular trope which is the odalisque, but I also reference the reclining Buddha from the East. This duality presents a kind of visual ambiguity.



A: Has your approach to making art changed over the years?

WN: It took a while for me to sit comfortably with the idea of making self-portraits because I always thought of it as a very self-indulgent thing to do, but truthfully, I think it’s the most honest and genuine thing I can offer to the world. I’ve often asked myself what the difference is between a selfie and a self-portrait – because everybody has a phone these days and is constantly creating images of themselves. In my opinion, a self-portrait has a lot to do with looking inwards, and a selfie is more outward. I’m not saying that one is better than the other, but I’m definitely more interested in the interior focus.

At the same time, I'm very aware that to create an image you have to work with external objects and materials. With self-portraiture, the first layer of that is clothing, hair colour and everything else. There's a shell to the self and we cannot deny that fact, but I think the action begins at the point where the internal and the external meet.

The exhibition runs until 27 March. Find out more [here](#).

Words: Millie Walton

Image Credits:

- 1. WAWI NAVARROZA *Start Here, A Lesson on Looking (Self-Portrait with Mandarins)* 2019. archival pigment print on Hahnemühle, cold-mounted on acid-free aluminum, with artist's exhibition frame i.e. wrapped fabric on wood, colored frame. Courtesy of SILVERLENS.**
- 2. WAWI NAVARROZA *The Heap/Viva La Vida (Portrait of A Female Artist at 40, Self-Portrait)*, 2019. archival pigment print on Hahnemühle, cold-mounted on acid-free aluminum, with artist's exhibition frame i.e. wrapped fabric on double wood frame custom-tinted to WN skin tone. Courtesy of SILVERLENS**
- 3. WAWI NAVARROZA *The Dotted Self/Every Thought A Constellation (Psoriatic Self-Portrait)*, 2019. archival pigment print on Hahnemühle, cold-mounted on aluminum, with artist's exhibition frame i.e. wood frame custom-tinted to WN skin tone 45h x 34w in. Courtesy of SILVERLENS.**
- 4. WAWI NAVARROZA, *Remember Who You Are (Strange Fruit/The Other Asian, Self-Portrait with Pineapple)*, 2019. archival pigment print on Hahnemühle, cold-mounted on acid-free aluminum, with artist's exhibition frame i.e. wrapped fabric on wood, colored frame. Courtesy of SILVERLENS.**
- 5. WAWI NAVARROZA, *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter/The Self-Portraitist (After Alcuáz, Self-Portrait)*, 2019. archival pigment print on Hahnemühle, cold-mounted on acid-free aluminum, with artist's exhibition frame i.e. wrapped fabric on double wood frame custom-tinted to WN skin tone. Courtesy of SILVERLENS.**

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